The question of whether Hebrews is anti-Jewish has vexed readers. To answer it, one must pay careful attention to what the text says and does not say. Moreover, the coherence of the author's claim that the old covenant is superseded by the new covenant is open to question.

The question of whether the letter to the Hebrews is anti-Jewish continues to bedevil both scholars and preachers. While this essay will not put the matter to rest, it offers a framework for considering the issue. I am a theologian who has worked on Jewish-Christian relations. Even though I read and take seriously biblical scholarship, I am not a biblical scholar. My focus is therefore on how we talk about Hebrews.

Let us consider two "ideal types" of answers to the question. Since typecasting simplifies in the name of clarity, we shall refer to these two types as the "yes" and "no" types. The "yes" type interprets Hebrews as though it was written from the Christian side of a divide between Judaism and Christianity. The displaced old covenant, it contends, implies that Judaism is at least implicitly replaced by Christianity, the people Israel by the church. It assumes that a clear separation between Judaism and Christianity has taken place by the latter half of the first century C.E. and that the conflict raised by this division occasions the writing of Hebrews. The "no" type assumes precisely the opposite and makes the argument that the actual text of Hebrews is free of any terminology (i.e., Jews, Judaism, Christianity, Gentiles, church) that plays such a large role in the argument for "yes" type. Advocates of both types admit that we know little about the date, place, context, audience, or author of Hebrews, yet each will try to infer something of the context from the text.
THE "YES" TYPE

Some careful students of Hebrews obviously view the epistle as anti-Jewish. Lillian Freudmann argues that "Hebrews reflects a general preoccupation of Christian writers in the late first century with demonstrating the superiority of Christianity over Judaism."1 Hebrews, according to her, is directed at Jewish Christians and tries to "avert a danger that is very real: the desertion of Christianity for the Mosaic faith." The letter serves this end by arguing that the "new covenant replaced the old one just as Jesus and his faith supplanted Moses and the Law."2

Freudmann focuses on the letter's discussion of God's promise of a new covenant in Jer 31:30–34 and argues that its interpretation of the new covenant condemns the old one as obsolete, "and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear."3 She points out, quite correctly, that Jeremiah 31 gives

no indication that God annulled or cancelled His covenant with His people. . . . Even less is there a suggestion of any modification of the partner with whom the contract is made. This is stated in so many words in verse 32, "Because this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel . . . I will be their God and they will be My people."4

In sum, she finds that Hebrews, along with much else in the New Testament, "transmitted an anti-Torah, anti-Jewish, and antisemitic ideology."5

Freudmann's argument, however, is too strong. For example, the terms "Jews," "Gentiles," and "Christians" do not appear in Hebrews, and no mention is made of any replacement people or new partner in the covenant. Also her claim that Hebrews is "antisemitic" is anachronistic. Anti-Semitism was coined in the nineteenth century to give expression to racist prejudice against Jews. If Hebrews has a bias against Jews, it is a religious, not a racial, bias. Nonetheless, Freudman is by no means alone in her contention that Hebrews is anti-Jewish.

Samuel Sandmel makes a similar but more nuanced argument, pointing out that Hebrews "is an exposition of the conviction that Christianity is the ideal religion, the realization of the Platonic 'ideal.'"6 In the horizontal Platonism of Hebrews, oriented to the unfolding of history, Judaism is the pale imitation "of the perfection that came in the form of Christianity, the ideal." As put by his teacher Clarence Tucker Craig, "Christianity is the perfect religion because it is even better than the second best, Judaism."

Sandmel notes that "Judaism is not vilified in Hebrews, nor are Jews aspersed." Indeed, Hebrews pays attention not to Jews or Judaism of the time of its writing (whenever that

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2Ibid.
3Ibid., 156.
4Ibid.
5Ibid., 158.
was) but to “the ancient Judaism of Scripture,” as evidenced in the tabernacle and wilderness. The anti-Judaism of Hebrews is reflected, in part, in its continued argument for the superiority of Christ to the angels who allegedly gave the first covenant and for the inferiority of Moses. Christ is superior also to the high priest, who entered the inner chamber of the earthly sanctuary annually, because Christ entered into the holy place, heaven, once for all and made an atonement with his own blood, not that of animals.\textsuperscript{7} The later, clearly developed, anti-Judaism of the patristic era stressed the superiority/inferiority motif. Yet Sandmel also notes that when Hebrews turns to exhortation, urging the congregation to hold fast to their faith, the letter cites as examples of such faith Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and others. All the exemplars of faith are Israelites.

Nonetheless, according to Sandmel, Hebrews is anti-Jewish because it is supersessionist: Judaism is “the worthy but imperfect preparation for the perfection which is Christianity. The Christ has superseded the Law; Christianity has superseded Judaism.”\textsuperscript{8} Sandmel assumes in this argument that the supersession of the “old covenant” in Hebrews implies that Judaism, too, is superseded. But Hebrews claims only that the sacrificial cult is superseded.

John Gager essentially agrees with Sandmel, while admitting that “Hebrews is an enigma in all respects.”\textsuperscript{9} He likens Hebrews to Melchizedek, whom it celebrates, a “fatherless and motherless figure.” And while the letter’s focus on the sacrificial worship of Israel renders it unique in early Christian literature, Gager nonetheless finds it to be “utterly typical, for it reflects the general preoccupation of Christian writers in the late first century with demonstrating the absolute superiority of Christianity over Judaism.”\textsuperscript{10} Gager essentially reasons backward from the epistle’s argument for the superiority of Christianity over Judaism to the conclusion that the “slippage” resisted by Hebrews was slippage from Christianity back to Judaism. He admits that it is unclear whether this defection was to Judaism on the part of Jewish converts or to a Judaized Christianity on the part of Gentile converts. He admits both the difficulty, if not impossibility, of establishing the context necessary to make sense of the text. But he upholds the necessity of trying to find some way to clarify the context, at least partially. This problem thwarts all efforts to interpret the document.

What Hebrews argues against, says Gager, is the continued validity of the old covenant.”\textsuperscript{11} He then makes the following point:

“Hebrews says nothing at all about the Jews as such and shows no inclination to identify the recipients of the new covenant as Gentiles. Certainly there is no sign that Jews are rejected by God or stand under a curse. In fact, chapter 11 contains a long list of biblical figures who exem-

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{7} Ibid., 121.
\bibitem{8}Ibid., 122.
\bibitem{10} Ibid., 181.
\end{thebibliography}
plify the very attitude of faith that the author is urging upon his readers.\textsuperscript{11}

He further points out that this could be viewed as "a critique of Judaism from within, not unlike that of those first-century Jews known to Philo who held that observance of the old, 'physical' commandments was no longer necessary once their true spiritual meaning was brought to light."

Nonetheless, Gager contends that the letter's position is more radical, because it argues "that a new covenant has rendered the old one obsolete," thus going beyond the position with which Philo was acquainted. The old covenant is emptied, being reduced to nothing more than "a shadow of the good things to come" (Heb 10:1). If the author of Hebrews was Jewish, which Gager takes him "undoubtedly" to have been, "his Jewishness reduces itself to his background and culture. Take away that background and culture, and we are well on the way toward Marcion."

The fact is that Hebrews never mentions "Jews," "Gentiles," "the church," or "Christians" and is free of any claim that one people, whether named "Christians" or "Gentiles," has displaced and replaced another people.

The last author to consider is Norman Beck. Beck takes it as "natural for adherents of a new religion to claim superiority for their heroes and for their beliefs over the heroes and of their religious antecedents and competitors."\textsuperscript{14} From the claim that Hebrews argues against forms of temple worship that "had been reduced in value and importance for most Jews" by the time it was written, Beck concludes that Hebrews "is a frontal attack upon late-first-century Jewish religion as such." While recognizing that Hebrews is free of polemic that is either "viciously anti-Jewish" or "defamatory," he argues: "Nevertheless, it is anti-Jewish in that the ancient Israelite religion and religious practices are disparaged in the comparisons that abound in the work." For Beck, Hebrews is anti-Jewish because it attacks ancient forms

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 184.
of worship and Jewish faith contemporary with Hebrews. What links the two (ancient and contemporary) is the continuity between “the ancient Israelites and the Jews of today.”¹⁵

Beck retraces the argument of Hebrews and concludes, as our other authors have, with the passage that declares the old covenant obsolete and about to be replaced with a new one whose laws are written directly on the hearts of people and whose mediator is eternally in God’s presence. Because Christians are accustomed to regard “the law” as Jewish legalism and the “Word of God” (as cited in Heb 4:12–13) as the Bible, “Hebrews is anti-Jewish but not viciously anti-Jewish.”¹⁶

One issue that is problematic for these analyses is whether the letter’s claim that the “new covenant” supersedes and replaces the “old covenant” is a sufficient basis for labeling Hebrews as “anti-Jewish.” The fact is that Hebrews never mentions “Jews,” “Gentiles,” “the church,” or “Christians” and is free of any claim that one people, whether named “Christians” or “Gentiles,” has displaced and replaced another people (i.e., the people Israel or the Jewish people). In the later, clearly anti-Jewish literature of the church, both the old covenant and the people of the old covenant are displaced. Our four authors all presume that by the time Hebrews was written there was a clear split between two religions: Christianity, the inheritor of the new covenant, and Judaism, the inheritor of the old covenant. This assumption raises several questions. First, was there such a split by the time Hebrews was written? Second, how could we know, since we do not know when Hebrews was written? Third, what if this split was later than is commonly assumed or, in some cases, argued?¹⁷ Fourth, if such a split was in effect by the time Hebrews was written, would not the temple also have been destroyed by this time? And, if so, is Hebrews possibly trying to deal with a problem with which all Jews and presumably all Jesus-followers, whether Jewish or Gentile, also had to deal?

Another issue that remains problematic for those who assert that Hebrews is anti-Jewish is their overdependence on the epistle’s negative assessment of Israel’s sacrificial cult and, by implication, the temple. This is an insufficient basis for the conclusion that Hebrews is anti-Jewish. Since the second century B.C.E., various sects in Judaism argued that the temple was polluted, and the priests were corrupt. Furthermore, “each sect represented

¹⁵Ibid., 315.
¹⁶Ibid., 316.
¹⁷For example, I think that it was late and slow in developing. In 306 C.E. in Spain, the Council of Elvira issued 81 canons [rules] for Christian behavior. One said that “Catholic girls may not marry Jews or heretics.” Another stipulated that farmers “are not to allow Jews to bless the crops they have received from God.” A third threatened to excommunicate “any cleric or layperson who eats with Jews,” and the fourth also threatened to excommunicate any Christian who “confesses adultery with a Jewish or pagan woman” (J. L. Womer, tr. and ed., Morality and Ethics in Early Christianity [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987] 75–82). At the other end of the Mediterranean, in the late fourth century, the presbyter Chrysostom preached eight sermons against the Judaizers. These were members of his congregation, he tells us, who “were frequenting synagogues and Jewish homes” (W. A. Meeks and R. L. Wilken, Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Centuries of the Common Era [Missoula, Mont: Scholars Press, 1978] 87). The first two of Chrysostom’s eight sermons are included in this text. Such examples are evidence that several centuries after Hebrews church leaders were striving to effect a separation between Christianity and Judaism, a separation from the top down, from clergy to laity. How clear were the lines between Judaism and Christianity in the time of Hebrews, and why is such language absent from the author’s vocabulary?
itself as the true temple and its adherents as the true priests.”

The sects appropriated for themselves the claims to truth put forward by the temple. “Instead of the polluted temple and the corrupt priests, the sect and its leaders offer the only access to God.” Also, the development of Judaism meant that the synagogue, a lay institution, replaced the temple; the development of prayer and study of the Torah replaced sacrificial worship; and the scholar replaced the priest. Yet no one would imagine referring to the sects or advocates of early Judaism as anti-Jewish.

THE “NO” TYPE

We now turn to some authors who deny that Hebrews is anti-Jewish. Tim Perry, for one, argues against a reading of Hebrews as anti-Jewish essentially on the grounds that it is “based on a faulty reading of history, for it presumes that ‘Christianity’ and ‘Judaism’ were, at the time of the writing of the text, well defined, polar entities.”

In reality, “Christianity” at the time was “an internally diverse messianic sect within an equally diverse ‘Judaism.’” Further, the interpretation of texts is “fraught with difficulty when we know approximately the author(s), the intended audience(s), and have the text before us. In the case of Hebrews, we have only the text.”

Perry is careful to point out that Hebrews has been read by the later church “in anti-Judaic ways and further has been used to sponsor anti-Semitic actions,” a reading and use that he clearly repudiates. Therefore, he asks a different question of Hebrews: “Are there indications within the text that enable us to question anti-Judaic readings?” He finds two. First, the epistle’s comparison of Christ with Moses suggests that while Christ is worthy of “greater honor” than Moses, Moses himself should be honored because of his faithfulness in all of God’s house (3:2, 5). Second, the entire argument is a midrash, an interpretation of selected passages of the Septuagint. These passages “all announce God’s intention to do something radically new,” and Hebrews tries to demonstrate “that Jesus embodies this new divine design.” Therefore, Hebrews is not anti-Jewish but an attempt to persuade “one or perhaps several diverse Jewish schools about how to read the Torah specifically and the Hebrew Bible generally.”

For Hebrews, therefore, Jesus “cannot be understood apart from the faith in which he was raised,” and “the Hebrew Bible mediates Jesus.” At the same time, the new thing that God has done in Jesus calls forth from his followers a re-reading of the scriptures that mediate him. “Jesus represents both continuity with and discontinuity with Judaism, and neither can be emphasized to the neglect of the other.”

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19 Ibid., 132.
21 Ibid., 75.
22 Ibid., 76.
23 Ibid.
whether this new reading requires the claim that the old covenant has been superseded. Such a new reading could proceed on the basis of, for example, Paul's claim that Christ "confirmed" the promises given to the patriarchs and in order that the Gentiles might praise God for God's mercy (Rom 15:8–9).

Perry does not discuss, in this context, the claim that the new covenant has displaced the old and rendered it "obsolete" (a term that may be unique to Hebrews in the New Testament), nor does he discuss whether this is the only and necessary way to express the dialectic between faith in Christ and the faith of Torah-observant Jews. Since God had promised that the earlier covenant was "everlasting" or "eternal" (e.g., Gen 9:16; 17:7, 13, 19; 1 Chron 16:17), what does it say of God's faithfulness when we are told that God later decided to replace the covenant with a better one? This raises an issue of theodicy, namely, the trustworthiness or faithfulness of God, of God's hesed.

Charles P. Anderson argues that Hebrews cannot be read as though it were written when Christianity and Judaism were separate. Rather, "its assumptions about the people and the Law" indicate that it "belongs to an early stage of the process." Anderson asks an important question: "What is the assumed ethnic identity of those who are regarded in Hebrews as heirs of the new age, the descendants of Abraham? Are they Jews or Gentiles or both?" Does the new covenant, he asks, imply a new people, displacing the prior people, as in the later Adversus Judaeos ("Against the Jews") tracts of the church, or does Hebrews "stay within the limits of a radical but still 'in-house' critique of the cult, as found at Qumran?" Anderson rejects attempts to place Hebrews in the same category as the Gospel of John with its language of vilification against Jews as an opposing group. Hebrews never sets Jews and Gentiles in opposition or even mentions these terms. Instead, Anderson would have us ask of Hebrews two questions: Who are the descendants of Abraham who will inherit the new age, and what is the Law that is changed in this new age?

Two of God's promises to Abraham are important to Hebrews: one concerning his "seed" (Gen 15:4–5) and the other a land to be inhabited. The second of these is still "pending," according to Hebrews. "Land,' 'sabbath,' 'rest,' 'inheritance,' 'homeland' (patris), a 'bet-

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25Ibid., 257.
ter and abiding possession’ (10:34), and ‘the things not seen’ (11:1), all point to one object of hope.”

The argument in 4:6–10 tries to show that the land of Israel “was not the genuine rest, as is demonstrated by Psalm 95.” Land or rest is a promise not yet realized.

God also promises Abraham descendants (Gen 22:16–17). In this connection, Anderson takes up the impact of the Aqedah, the sacrifice of Isaac, on Hebrews. God’s promise of descendants was “through Isaac shall your descendants be named” (Gen 21:12).” There are two differences between the author of Hebrews and Paul in their uses of Abraham. First, Hebrews is not concerned with the promise to Abraham that involved Gentiles: “by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves” (Gen 22:18). If Hebrews had been written to evangelize Gentiles, this reference would have been tempting. Instead, the author emphasizes Abraham’s being tested by God and his passing the test (as, by the way, Jesus is tested in the story of the temptation). Anderson does not mention it, but the testing of Abraham was an important theme for early Judaism: “Ten trials were inflicted upon Abraham, our father (may he rest in peace), and he withstood all of them, to show you how great is His love for Abraham, our father, (may he rest in peace).”

Paul, for whom justification is apart from works, does not mention the sacrifice of Isaac. Anderson concludes:

In Hebrews, the argument proceeds along different lines. The blessing of Abraham comes in response not to his faith as stated in Genesis 15 but to his faith as evidenced in his obedience to the command of God as documented in Genesis 22. Unlike Paul, the author of Hebrews is not deterred by the fact that the story of Abraham successfully passing his test of faith follows his circumcision. Hebrews does not display any reluctance to regard God “as a rewarder of faithful deeds.” Nor is there any difficulty between faith and works in Hebrews. Good works are regarded as entirely positive. Only “bad” works are condemned, and these have nothing to do with Paul’s “works of the law.”

In sum, Abraham in Hebrews is not, as for Paul, a “type of faith, applicable to Gentiles as well as Jews. He is placed consistently within Jewish history, and no inferences for Gentiles are ever drawn from his faith.” The implication that Anderson draws from the use of Abraham in Hebrews is that “the appropriate object of mission is Israel. Israelites or Jews are the ‘seed of Abraham’ (2:16) with whom Christ is concerned; they are his ‘brothers’ (2:11), the ‘sons’ (2:10) and ‘children’ (2:14) whose transgressions under the first covenant are expiated by his sacrifice (9:15; cf. 2:17).”

Jews are the heir of the new age in Hebrews, Anderson argues. What about the law that is to change in the new age? This turns on how one reads Heb 7:11: “Now if perfection had

26Ibid., 259.
27Ibid., 261.
29Anderson, “Who are the Heirs?” 265.
30Ibid., 268.
been attainable through the Levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood—what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising, according to the order of Melchizedek . . . ?” What is referred to here, says Anderson, are “specific commandments concerning the Levitical priesthood and their sacrificial service to the people, nothing more.”

But it is senseless to think of the law as “given under” the Levitical priesthood. After all, the Torah was given on Sinai, and the priesthood is within the law, given by the law. So Anderson prefers the translation: “The people of Israel received regulations concerning the levitical priesthood.” Hebrews deals only with priestly laws. “It is 'liturgical' law (8:2; 6), and only liturgical law, that is changed in Hebrews.”

The Torah as a whole is unchanged, and the heirs of the new covenant are Israelites. There is no ethnic conflict in Hebrews.

Marie Isaacs interprets Hebrews as having been written to address the issue of “the loss of Israel's most sacred site, the temple in Jerusalem.” Because the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. occasioned Hebrews, “it is not surprising that its author drew so heavily upon Israel's cult in his presentation of the Christian faith.” Isaacs admits that “we know virtually nothing about the circumstances which led to its composition, original destination, date or authorship, apart from what we can infer from the letter itself.” It is the epistle's focus on Israel's cult from which Isaacs infers the occasion of its writing. She is clear that the letter to the Hebrews gives no indication of having been evoked by “the problems of the emergence of a Gentile Christianity within a still predominantly Jewish–Christian church. Hence nowhere do we find the designations 'Jew' or 'Gentile.'”

She further notes that there is no contrast in Hebrews between Christianity and Judaism (nor any mention of either one). The contrast that is drawn is the one between "the faithful and the faithless of the people of God past and present. As 3:2–6 makes clear, there is not two but one "household of God," of which both Moses and Jesus are members." Neither faithfulness nor faithlessness is an attribute "exclusive to the Christian community of the present" or "confined to Israel of old." She concludes that Hebrews "looks not to a discontinuous 'new' people, but to a renewed people of God." Hebrews does not call its readers to forsake Israel as the people of God, "but to relinquish Judaism's cult place, sacrificial system, and territory." Drastic as this may have been, “it was a challenge which both Judaism and emergent Christianity had to face” after the destruction of the temple.

Two of the many points in Isaacs's argument stand out as worth stressing in this discussion. First, while Hebrews makes a strong argument for Christ's superiority to the

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31Ibid., 269.
32Ibid., 270.
36Ibid.
37Ibid., 158.
Levitical priesthood, this claim does not place Hebrews outside Judaism. Judaism had its traditions about "righteous men" who had ascended into heaven: Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11), Enoch (1 En. 12:3; 2 En. 27:8), and Moses (Philo, Life of Moses, 2.288–91). Unlike the Gospel of John, Hebrews does not bother to deny that anyone else has ascended to heaven (see John 3:13) and even goes so far as to say that "by faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death" (11:5). This significant difference from John's Gospel indicates that, unlike John, Hebrews was not engaged in a polemical debate with Judaism.

Second, the epistle's exegetical methods are found in Jewish exegesis of the first century C.E. The author's listing of religious exemplars from history, allegorizing the names of Melchizedek and Jerusalem, explicating words in a text that may be misunderstood, highlighting a word, stringing texts together by a common word or theme, inferring from the lesser to the greater, and interpreting one word or cognate in the light of its usage elsewhere are all typical. So is the reading of scripture as prophecy addressed to a contemporary audience and its situation. The concern is not that the people addressed will return to Judaism, a possibility that is mentioned, but that they will miss out altogether on the "rest" promised by the living God.

CONCLUSION

Whatever one makes of the arguments pro and con on the issue of whether Hebrews is anti-Jewish, the first point has to be that, more than half a century after the Shoah (the "Destruction") wrought upon the Jewish people, preaching or teaching the letter in an anti-Semitic way should be strictly avoided. If preachers think that Hebrews is anti-Semitic, then they should preach against it and instead preach the good news of God's justification of the ungodly, which if it is not true for Jews it is also not true for Christians. Despite differences in understandings of continuity and discontinuity (both Judaism and Christianity have their discontinuities and continuities with the religion of biblical Israel), anti-Semitism remains an inappropriate way to frame those discontinuities. Such an approach contradicts not only the gospel of God's unfathomable grace but also the commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The traditional Christian contempt for Jews and Judaism should be replaced by preaching and teaching that Jews and Christians stand facing each other on one and only one ground, that of God's gracious love and loving grace.

Second, to ensure exegetical integrity, we should pay dogged attention to what the text actually says and, particularly, not read into it what we want to read out of it. Its use of the rhetoric of supersessionism is troublesome, particularly to those who have toiled to rethink relations between Jews and Christians. That fact, however, does not make Hebrews anti-Semitic, although it does raise questions for the text (as the text raises questions for its interpreters). In particular, we cannot understand Hebrews through a vocabulary foreign to it. Hebrews never speaks of Jews, Gentiles, Christians, and the church; nowhere does it imply that a group is displaced and that some other group is the replacement. (Hebrews is not, e.g., Tertullian's "Tract Against the Jews.") Even writers who say that Hebrews is not
anti-Semitic sometimes persist in speaking of the author as a Christian or as addressing Christians. Yet Hebrews never uses any of these words, including “church” and “Christians.” To interpret Hebrews in such terms, therefore, can easily lead to misinterpretation. There were Jewish Jesus-followers and Gentile Jesus-followers; Hebrews could have been addressing either or both. And the latter, had they been in the synagogue or simply among other Jesus-followers, could easily have been familiar with the scripture that Hebrews presupposes.

Third, we should not, for several reasons, assume an early and clear separation of Jesus-followers from Judaism. Both Judaism and Christianity took a long time (until the Talmudic era for Judaism and through the first four or six ecumenical councils for Christianity) to become defined. As W. H. C. Frend has cogently argued, early communities of Jesus-followers were organized as synagogues until sometime in the second century. Their members prayed three times a day and fasted twice a week, as Jews did, although they chose to fast on Wednesday and Friday, not Monday and Thursday. They were monotheists who used the Septuagint, as did the Jews, and took seriously the messianism, eschatology, angelology, and ethics of Judaism. Like Jews, they claimed to be the “people of God” (Heb 4:9), “a royal priesthood” and a “holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9). They thought, argued, and acted like Jews (1 Clement contains a haggadah on Adam and his sons (1 Clem 3–4). “There can be little question,” says Frend, “of the members of the ‘new Israel’ desiring to break all links with the old in the period from 75 to 100.”

Fourth, when careful attention to the text is a criterion for interpretation, the writers who deny anti-Judaism in Hebrews have the better argument. Hebrews gives no indication that the renewed people of God is anyone other than Israelites. And the requirement to pay close attention to what the text says indicates that the only issue of the old covenant that was superseded, for Hebrews, was the sacrificial system. There is no indication of the supersession of any other aspect of the Torah.

Precisely because of our post-Shoah context, we should be concerned with rethinking the relationship between the church and the people Israel, the Israel of God. We need to be particularly careful about our use of terms. “Anti-Judaism,” “anti-Semitism,” and “supersessionism” should be used carefully. “Anti-Semitism” has no relevance whatsoever to the his-

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39A parallel point may be made with regard to Paul: when he argues against the “law,” the presenting issues are two and only two—circumcision and the food laws. Otherwise, he can say, “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything” (1 Cor 7:19).
torical situation of Hebrews. The Nazis were anti-Semitic; they wanted to get the Jewish “race” out of the gene pool by killing every last Jew on earth. They wanted, as they put it, to make the earth Judenrein, cleansed of Jews, through a systematic program of Judenvernichtung, the destruction of Jews. The author of Hebrews was not anti-Semitic.

“Anti-Judaism” can take two forms, neither of which is benign. One form avoids engaging in the language of vilification and vituperation of Jews and satisfies itself simply with saying that Jews are mistaken in remaining faithful to a covenant that has been rendered “obsolete,” a covenant that has been replaced by a new and better covenant, and that they should enter the new covenant and renounce their Judaism in doing so. But this assumption, which amounts to the claim that there should be no Jews, leads in a disastrous direction. As Raul Hilberg puts it, the church’s attitude toward Jews went through three phases, from “you have no right to live among us as Jews” to “you have no right to live among us” (i.e., we will expel you from the country, as from Spain, Portugal, England, France, Germany) to “you have no right to live.”

The second form of anti-Judaism makes two claims: one is that Jews lost out on being the people of God because they committed a “trail of crimes,” culminating in their crucifixion of Jesus. The other is that Judaism is in every respect an inferior religion. The old, carnal, ethnocentric, works-righteous, legalistic Jews are everything bad that we new, spiritual, universal, grace-filled, and loving Gentiles can never be. One can find this whole litany and more in virtually any anti-Jewish tract published in the history of the church.

Neither of these forms of anti-Judaism is present in Hebrews.

This brings us to the issue of supersessionism, a version of which is in Hebrews. What are we to make of it? First, Hebrews says, “In speaking of a ‘new covenant,’ he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear” (8:13). The remark that the new covenant makes the old obsolete moves utterly beyond what Jeremiah says in 31:31–34, which (from the Septuagint) immediately precedes the claim in Hebrews that the old covenant is obsolete and soon to vanish. Here, Hebrews may have in mind Roman or Hellenistic understandings of law, according to which new laws replace old laws. (Writers of the anti-Jewish tracts repeat this claim at every possible opportunity.) Yet there is no hint in Jeremiah of anything other than the form of the covenant. The intent of the covenant to be in the hearts of the people would now become a reality.

The argument of Hebrews as to why the old covenant needed to be replaced has several aspects, one of which is the claim that old covenant did not result in “perfection.”

Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under the priesthood—what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron (7:11)?

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The older commandment was abrogated "because it was weak and ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect); there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God" (7:18). The old law was merely a "shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities" and can "never . . . make perfect those who approach" (10:1). Had the worshipers been "cleansed once for all, [they] would no longer have any consciousness of sin" (10:2). Even the high priest had to offer sacrifices to God for his own sins (5:3).

Yet Hebrews had earlier warned the congregation, recipients of this new covenant and new priesthood, about the need for "repentance from dead works" (6:1), for which the epistle seeks to lay a foundation. And the author will later repeat the same warning, more strongly, this time for those who have entered the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus:

For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy "on the testimony of two or three witnesses." How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know the one who said "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." . . . It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (10:26–31).

Has the perfection promised in Hebrews been any more actualized in the community of those who worship through the sacrifice of Christ than in the old covenant? Has the new law proved any less "weak" than the old? Why does Hebrews fall so quickly back on the language of threat—threat of the fury of fire, of punishment, of outraging God, of God's vengeance?

When the texts that became the New Testament were being written, the people Israel already had a long history; the emerging church had almost no history. The remarkably self-critical literature of ancient Israel provides many indications that members of that people and sometimes the whole people had sinned. It was easy for the church to lay claim to some kind of perfection that had escaped Israel. But the church today, unless it has a case of ecclesiastical amnesia, also has a long history that is full of sin, particularly and ironically against the Jews. It would behoove us to remember Augustine's saying, "a long past is a long remembrance of the past" and to note that a long remembrance occasions a long repentance.⁴¹

In Exodus 32, we are told that while Moses was on Sinai with God receiving the two tablets of the covenant, Aaron agreed to the people's request that he make gods for them. Out of their gold rings he made a calf, "and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel" (v. 6). God was so disturbed, to put it mildly, that Moses had to ask: "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of

Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth' (32:11–12). Trying to assuage God’s anger, Moses asks God to be concerned about God’s reputation among the Egyptians! Eventually, he returns up the mountain to God and says: “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written” (v. 32). At the end, Moses hears God say: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation . . .” (34:6–7). This is “stored grace,” one rabbi called it—grace sufficient forever and for everyone, Gentiles included.

Each covenant has its ongoing dilemmas with God’s love and justice. But it is not as clear today as it was to the author of Hebrews that the new covenant is any less weak than the old in producing perfection or any more gracious in its attitude toward sinners. Nor does Hebrews make, finally, a convincing case that this new covenant, therefore, displaces the old, even if that displacement is limited only to cultic matters.